

When the river sounds...

By Mañanita Ochoa

Rivers and democracies are very much alike. An old Latin American saying goes that “when the river sounds, it carries stones.” I don’t know if that proverb is still in use, but I remember my father, with his threatening and suspenseful tone, saying: “when the river sounds!...” and the threat of the final judgment in his voice. Without even finishing the sentence, those four words put an end to the discussion and whoever embodied the river was annihilated for life, with their reputation in shambles and an uncertain social life. What injustice!. When the river sounds it is because it carries water in addition to stones; it is flowing forcefully and setting new courses for its bed, making and correcting mistakes as all rivers do and opening new paths, leaving behind stones at its banks for future bathers. Totalitarian systems appear to be silent, calm rivers. Sometimes such systems invite one to embark on such peaceful course if only for a short trip, especially if someone offers a free boat or a luxurious yacht. Democracies on the other hand, are strong, unruly, noisy and large rivers that carry rocks and many other surprises, and make so much racket that one feels compelled to jump ship before the boat sinks. Sometimes the seasickness is so strong that many do jump ship disenchanted with the ravages and uncertainties. Democracies are daring and determined rivers, with stones in all sizes and even piranhas, but also beautiful trout and salmon. On the banks of this powerful river you can find monkeys and serpents as well as Tarzan and his concubines.

The jungles by these free rivers grow shaggy like hairs on adolescent legs, ashamed of their Amazonic abundance, but fed to gluttony by the largesse of their waters. Those rivers are scary, but we shouldn’t fear them. There is a lot of life in them and you can find strong and healthy plants and animals by their shores. They are rivers like the Orinoco or the Amazon, with big and beautiful deltas all over the place, and open to any ship, small and large. The sediment is so rich that in time it becomes oil, if the gods so bless the river. But it is the great ships that we build to navigate these rivers that give us just pride and develop industries: tourism, shipyards, hotels, bikini factories, fishmongers and ports.

The Guaire, on the other hand, that forgotten anorexic river that traverses with lame sadness the length of Caracas, is a quite river because it has no water anymore. I have been told that in a more innocent past for Caracas, boats and canoes crossed it and gathered speed near El Paraiso until they reached La Vega. Children and “quinceañeros” dreamt of their fates as captains inspired by far lands and riches. During Carnival feasts, flower carts with long straws would slurp and spread the Guaire’s holy water amongst those celebrating ghosts of rituals past. What fun to have a loud Guaire, even if it had stones and caused other problems for drunks lost in the night and trapped in its current. If I was queen of Venezuela, my first decree would be to make all the rivers audible with water and stones, and I would begin with the Guaire. Then we would have free elections to elect the next queen and we would celebrate with a boat parade from Petare to La Vega!